

Opening Statement
Chairman Hutchison
Hearing on Flight Delays and Air Traffic Control
May 10, 2001

Good Morning. Thank you all for coming.

Today the Aviation Subcommittee will examine the connection between the growing problem of flight delays and the Air Traffic Control system. For years, we have heard charges that the Federal Aviation Administration has been slow to deploy new technology and that the equipment used by air traffic controllers is unreliable and outdated. I personally do not believe that this is the whole truth, as the United States has the most complex airspace on Earth, and the FAA faces an incredible challenge to get 680 million annual passengers to their destinations safely. Clearly, they must be doing something right, since American airspace is also the safest. The FAA's primary mission is, and must always remain, the safety of the traveling public.

Nonetheless, the ATC system is not as efficient as it should be. The equipment in many of these facilities was designed in the 1950s, and was never meant to handle the volume of traffic that occurs every day. Equipment outages have often caused chaotic nationwide delays and cancellations. Even new air traffic facilities, such as the tower at Reagan National Airport, have been outfitted with old computers and radar screens. Modernization efforts have taken too long, cost too much, and done too little.

Funding is, of course, always an issue. As both the Chairman of this Subcommittee and an Appropriator, I have fought many battles over transportation and budgetary priorities. But, with the passage of AIR-21, Congress has prioritized aviation infrastructure. We will not back off that commitment.

We have tried this before. Between 1982 and 1999, the FAA spent \$27 billion on ATC systems, facility upgrades, and support equipment. This was the initial implementation of the FAA's ATC Modernization Program. The program was originally scheduled to be completed in 1993 at a total cost of \$12.6 billion. Today, ATC modernization is not expected to be completed until 2012 at a cost several times the original projection. Certainly, a portion of this overrun is due to the burgeoning demand for air travel since deregulation in the late 1970s. But conservative estimates place the amount of money wasted in this effort between \$1.6 billion and \$2.8 billion.

It's bad out there. Passengers are fed up with speculative airline schedules that bear little or no relationship to the actual flight times. They are tired of wondering if their flight will not be one of the 2.6 million that are canceled or delayed.

The airlines must provide their customers with accurate information and abandon the practice of over-scheduling. I am sponsoring a bill, the Aviation Delay Prevention Act, that will allow the airlines to consult with one another to reduce over-scheduling and coordinate operations during bad weather. Senator Rockefeller and Chairman McCain have joined me in cosponsoring the bill.

The most important objective of the bill, and the real answer to passenger frustration, is to build more capacity. First and foremost, we need more runways and gates. However, these improvements will not have as great an impact unless they are accompanied by upgrades in the air traffic control system. The airlines must partner with the FAA to deploy new technologies that will permit us to more efficiently use our airspace. Improved instrumentation, on the ground and onboard the aircraft, will enable planes to safely close the five-mile gap and to fly through and around weather.